Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions
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1   Introduction

1.1 Background

Ethiopia is an ancient country that continuously remained independent. It, however, emerged with its present borders and ethnic make-up at the end of the 19th century because of the territorial expansion undertaken by Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913). The history of the country is riddled by intra- and inter-state conflicts. In its modern history, the country had to withstand external aggression. Internally as well, it experienced acute political and economic contradictions.

The perennial nature of conflicts in Ethiopia could be explained be by the chief characters of the Ethiopian state – its practice of exclusionary politics and the use of brute force to dominate to dominate the people of the country. Consequently, conflicts in Ethiopia have class, ethnic and regional dimensions.

After the collapse of the military regime in 1991 and the seizure of state power by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF),[1] the country has been reconstituted into an ethnic federation. This thesis aims at examining the impact of Ethiopia's federalism on ethnic conflicts by taking several cases from the Somali and Benishagnul-Gumuz regions.[2]

Federal forms of government in any country result from unique political and historical processes. In the Ethiopian case, the 'federal restructuring'[3] of the country relates to the problem of a failed nation-building project through assimilation and centralization.

The project of building a highly centralised state was intensified during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie (1931-1974) through his twin policies of centralisation and modernisation (Clapham 1969). This project, however, faced several challenges from different corners of the

country. During the 1960s and 70s, Ethiopian opposition politics was dominated by such slogans as 'land to the tiller' and the 'nationalities problem.'[4] Almost all of the political groups that emerged during the revolutionary fervour of the 1970s promoted these slogans. However, there were differences among the major political forces about the extent to which the right of self-determination should be applied. For instance, ethno-nationalist movements that took centre stage of opposition after the 1974 revolution[5] were vocal about their unqualified right to exercise self-determination up to and including secession. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), for example, in its formative years 'claimed that it was fighting for self-determination… which could result in anything from autonomy, federation, confederation, up to and including independence' (Markakis 1987: 254). All of the Eritrean separatist movements considered Eritrea as an Ethiopian colony and sought its independence. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which emerged in 1974, also aimed at the creation of an independent state for the Oromo. These nationalist aspirations found expression primarily through armed struggle, as the military regime (the Derg)[6] under Mengistu Hailemariam (1974-1991) did not provide any other alternative. The situation led to decades of devastating civil wars.

The Derg's formal recognition of the right of self-determination in 1976 did not lead to any meaningful change in terms of decentralisation of power and creation of autonomous self-administrative structures for the country's ethnic groups. The military regime's attempt to reorganise the country's internal administration after its establishment of People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in 1987also failed to create a new social and political basis for the country (Clapham 1994: 34). Hence, the reconstruction of the Ethiopian state was left in the hands of the EPRDF that assumed power after its military victory over the Derg in May 1991.

The July 1991 Peace and Democracy Conference that led to the establishment of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) adopted a Transitional Charter that recognised Eritrea's secession and the rights of 'nations and nationalities' to self-determination up to and including secession. Based on the charter, the year 1992 saw a restructuring of the country's internal administration and the formation of 14 regional administrations along ethno-linguistic lines (TGE 1992).[7] The 1994 constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) was also another major reflection of EPRDF's consideration of 'ethnic contradiction' as the primary problem in the country's politics. Like the 1991 charter, the 1994 constitution recognised the rights of

ethnic self-determination up to secession. Moreover, it created a federal government with nine regional states. These include Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNPR), Gambella and Harari. The regions are hierarchically divided into *zones*[8], *woreda,*[9] special-*woreda*[10] and *kebele*.[11]

The organisation of both the federal and regional governments is parliamentary with legislative, executive and judicial branches. The federal parliament is composed of two houses– the lower chamber, called the House of People's Representatives (HoPR) and the upper chamber, the House of Federation (HoF). According to the federal constitution, the HoPR has 548 members elected from majority-based single-member constituencies for a five-year term and 20 seats reserved for 'minority nationalities and peoples' (art. 54). It has the power to legislate and exercise oversight over the executive. Like other parliamentary systems, a political party or a coalition of political parties that controls the majority of the seats at the HoPR forms the executive. So far, the ERPDF that controlled the majority of the seats at the HoPR formed the federal government for three five-year terms. The second chamber of the Ethiopian parliament, the HoF does not have a legislative function (for more discussion on HoF, see chapters 4 and 8).

The regions have their own legislative assemblies called State Councils. With the exception of Harari and SNNPR all the regions have unicameral legislatures. Members of the state councils serve a five-year term. The regional assemblies enact laws on those powers, either exclusively or concurrently given to them. They also have the function of oversight over the regional executive.

The prime minister leads the federal executive. The ceremonial president, nominated by the HoPR and elected by a two-thirds majority vote in a joint session of the HoPR and the HoF, serves for six years and is limited to a maximum of two terms (art. 70). Ever since EPRDF's takeover of power in May 1991, Meles Zenawi, the leader of both the TPLF and the EPRDF has been the head of the executive. He served as president of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-1995) and has been prime minister since the inauguration of the federal government in 1995. The regional executive, called Administrative Council is also established on parliamentary principles.

In addition to the legislature and the executive, the federal constitution created a dual and parallel court system – federal and regional. Both of these have three tiers including – first instance, high and supreme courts. The federal constitution provided several provisions that could serve as safeguards for judicial independence such as tenure

security (art. 79/40) and a court structure separate from the executive. In spite of these, there is little judicial independence in practice (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003: 100). Moreover, unlike supreme courts in many federations, the judiciary in Ethiopia lacks the jurisdiction to interpret constitutional issues as this is in the purview of the HoF.

The party in power (the EPRDF) contends that ethnic federalism will be the basis for a reformed Ethiopian state structure and bring about a solution to ethno-nationalist conflicts.

Obviously, the federal restructuring of the country brought several changes to ethnicity and governance. Hence, the reconstitution of Ethiopia into an ethnic federation poses sets of opportunities and challenges. This study examines the impacts of federalism on conflicts using comparative and empirical approaches.

1.2 Issues and Problems

The adoption of federalism in Ethiopia appears to have been motivated by the problem of finding an appropriate state structure that could be used as an instrument of managing the complex ethno-linguistic diversity of the country and reduce conflicts. In spite of this, ethnic conflicts are still critical challenges in the country. In fact, the record of federalism regarding ethnic conflict is a mixed one. On the one hand, it led to the recognition of the cultural and linguistic rights of ethnic groups in the country. On the other hand, it appears to have transformed and generated localised ethnic conflicts (Abbink 2006: 390). Many of the conflicts that emerged at local and regional levels and related to the federal restructuring of the country could be referred as autonomy conflicts.[12] Autonomy conflicts in the context of this study refer to those conflicts that emerge on a range of issues such as self determination/secession, the politics of resource sharing, political power, representation, identity, citizenship, ethnic and regional boundary and others. For the sake of brevity, such conflicts could be considered from the following five trends (for summary, see Table 1.1 below).

First, federal restructuring and identity conflicts: The central place given to ethnicity in terms of state organisation, representation, entitlement, and mobilisation has in a remarkable fashion brought the question of ethnicity to the realm of the politico-legal. In this respect, the government introduced institutions and legislations for the codification and regulation of ethnic identity (see chapter 2). While fitting into the new ethnic federal structure has been more or less straightforward for

the bigger ethnic groups, the question of defining the ethnic identity of many minority groups has become controversial. Thus, there are today peaceful and at times violent contestations over ethnic identity. In several regions ethnic activists who could be named ethnic entrepreneurs[13] mobilise their constituencies to secure state recognition of their separate identity. As discussed in chapters 4, 6, and 8, federalism led to the re-examination for the ethnic identity of several groups. This unfortunately contributes to the accentuation of ethnic otherness and causes mistrust and at times violent conflicts tearing apart common ties that took several generations to develop.

Second, intra-federal boundary conflicts: The institutionalisation of ethnic federalism led to the process of drawing inter-regional boundaries with the premise of making ethnic, regional and in some cases sub-regional boundaries (e.g. SNNPR) congruent. However, this process has not been smooth. On the one hand, boundary making led to the generation of violent conflicts among various ethnic groups, which did not have a history of protracted conflict, for instance Guji and Gedeo (see chapter 4). On the other hand, long running disputes between neighbouring clans of the Somali, Afar and Oromia regions have now become nation-state type boundary conflicts. Interestingly, all of the three regions established permanent bureaus dealing with border affairs (see chapter 8). Boundary making between the Benishangul-Gumuz and the Oromo regions also led to violent conflicts. In a contradistinction to the overwhelming trend – the entanglement of inter-regional boundary making with conflicts – the same process appeared to have contributed to the normalisation of inter-ethnic relationships between the Gumuz and their Amhara neighbours (see chapter 9).

Third, intra-regional conflicts over federal resources: Such conflicts occurred in almost all the regions. In those regions where a single titular[14] ethnic group constitutes the majority of the regional population such as Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, intra-regional and intra-ethnic conflicts have been less violent. In fact, intra-ethnic conflicts could become ideological and contribute to conflict reduction, if the political system allows democratic and peaceful contestation for power. As Ethiopia has not so far allowed open contestation for power, it is difficult to tell the extent to which federalism contributed to the development of intra-ethnic ideological conflicts. As opposed to the above three regions, intra-regional and intra-ethnic conflicts in the Somali region have been violent. The clans in the Somali region appear to play the functional role of competing ethnic groups in multi-ethnic regions (see chapter 6). In contrast to those regions where a single titular group constitutes the

majority of the regional population, intra-regional conflicts have been violent and more widespread in the multi-ethnic regions such as the SNNPR, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz (see chapter 4).

Fourth, conflict between titular and the non-titular groups: Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, by placing 'sovereignty' over the ethnic groups introduced a new system of entitlement. Accordingly, those who live in their designated ethnic homelands became titular, whereas those who for different reasons find themselves out of their designated ethnic homelands became non-titular. The narrowing of regional and local citizenship to the level of primordial ethnicity as has been pursued in Ethiopia reduces not only new migrants but also people who lived out of their officially proclaimed ethnic homelands for many generations into new minorities. Not surprisingly, this led to a conflict between the titular and the non-titular groups as discussed in chapters 4 and 7 of this thesis.

Fifth, conflict between the government and secessionist movements: This used to be the dominant form of violent conflict in Ethiopia during the pre-1991 period. The major insurgent movements were the EPLF, the TPLF and the OLF. Today, such insurgent movements do not threaten the political centre. There are, however, still ethnic liberation movements such as the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the OLF. The continuation of armed secessionist ethnic insurgencies after the reconstitution of the country into an ethnic federation and the recognition of the right of secession shows some of the gaps that prevail between the theory and practice of Ethiopian federalism (discussed in chapter 2).

Table 1.1 Summary of trends of conflicts in Ethiopia

Conflict type	Example parties/actors to the conflict	Disputed issues	Conflict type
Identity conflicts	Silte vs. Gurage	Identity, territory	Non-violent
	Dubbe vs. Somali		Violent
Intra-federal boundary	Somali vs. Afar	Territory, ethnic boundaries, ethnic identity	Violent
	Somali vs. Oromia		Violent
	Oromia vs. SNNPR		Violent
	BGNRS-Oromia		Violent
Intra-regional conflicts	Inter-clan conflicts in the Somali region	Territory, political representation, identity	Violent
	Inter-ethnic conflicts among titular ethnic groups in multi-ethnic (SNNPR; Gambella; BGNRS)		Violent
Titular vs. Non-Titular	Inter-ethnic conflicts between titular and non-titular (Oromia, Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz)	Territory, political representation	Violent
Armed insurgency	ONLF vs. the EPRDF Government	Self-determination vs. terrorism	Violent
	OLF vs. the EPRDF Government		Violent

1.3 Problem Statement

The federal restructuring of Ethiopia, even if it was aimed at finding a 'resolution' to ethnic conflicts, it led to the changing of arenas of conflicts by decentralising them and also generated new localised inter-ethnic conflicts. The examination on the impact federalism on ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia in general and in the two study regions – Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz will be informed by informed by Donald Horowitz's five conflict reduction mechanisms (Horowitz 1985: 597-9).

First, federalism may help reduce inter-ethnic conflicts 'by proliferating the points of power so as to take the heat off a single focal point' (Horowitz 1985: 598). Such a dispersal of power could prevent one of the contending political parties that control the political centre from projecting its power throughout the country and thereby centralise

policymaking and implementation. In fact, federalism as underscored by Daniel Elazar, is about a democratic polity based 'upon a matrix of constituent institutions that together share power, not through a single centre but a multi-centred or non-centralized' structure (1996: 2). If federalism brings such decentralisation of power, ethnic conflict 'may lose some of its urgency and its capacity to inspire fear' (Horowitz 1985: 598). In addition, creating a federal system through devolution would make federating units and their sub-regional administrative structures objects of local/regional competitions and conflicts (Ibid).

As this thesis endeavours to demonstrate, the reconstitution of the Ethiopian state into an ethnic federation has mixed results. The proliferation of the points of power led to the emergence of regional and local conflicts. Indeed, the majority of the conflicts that occur in the country after the adoption of federalism are localised and decentralised without posing credible threats to the central elite. In some cases, inter-regional conflicts over the boundaries of the newly created ethnic regions appeared to have reduced threats coming to the political centre. For instance, intra-federal boundary disputes between the Somali and the Oromia regions undermined overarching alliance that Muslim Oromo and Somali clans used to forge against the political centre in the pre-federal period. Notwithstanding these, because of lack of a political space that guarantees democratic and peaceful contestation for political power, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has not prohibited the central elite (of the TPLF/EPRDF) from monopolising power throughout the country. Consequently, the political centre remained the most important jewel that almost all the major contending forces seek to control.

Second, federalism could be arranged to emphasise intra-ethnic conflict in order to reduce inter-ethnic conflicts (Horowitz 1985: 598). This study considers the extent to which the federal restructuring of Ethiopia resulted in the emergence of intra-ethnic conflicts. As shown in chapters 6 and 7, ethnic federalism impelled intra-ethnic conflict in both of the study regions. However, it is important to note that intra-ethnic conflicts that emerged in the Somali region have both violent and non-violent aspects.

Third, federalism may help reduce ethnic conflicts by adopting 'policies that create incentives for interethnic cooperation' such as electoral inducements for inter-ethnic coalitions (Ibid 598). The record of Ethiopian federalism on this count has been problematic for two reasons. The ethnic basis of federalism does not encourage the emergence of inter-ethnic electoral coalitions; and the emergence of the EPRDF as a dominant party rules out inter-ethnic electoral alliances.

Fourth, federalism could contribute to reducing ethnic conflicts by encouraging 'alignments based on interests other than ethnicity' (Ibid 599). In contradistinction to this, the Ethiopian federal system is based on the principle of ethnic atomisation where ethnicity emerged as the most important instrument of state organisation, local/regional citizenship, and political mobilisation. This fosters what David Brown calls the ideology of resentment (2007: 75). As a result, ethno-nationalist movements that seek to exploit apparent or actual ethnic grievances have been given an institutional platform for their politics of protecting the 'virtuous Us, from the demonized Other' (Ibid). Hence, from the experience so far, the prospect for the development of alignments in Ethiopia based on crosscutting cleavages such as class, gender, environment and others seem to be low.

Fifth, federalism could contribute to reduction of conflicts through policies that mitigate regional disparities through distribution of economic resources and preferential treatment (Horowitz 1985: 599). Like many other political issues, the record of Ethiopian federalism on the question of sharing the 'national cake' has been contentious. The provision of preferential treatment to the hitherto marginalised groups is one of the positive outcomes of the federal restructuring of the country. There are, however, controversies regarding policies and practices of resource sharing.

1.4   Research Questions

The central question that this study examines is the impact of the federal system upon inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia in general and in the study regions in particular. Specifically, it examines the impact of ethnic federalism in the generation/transformation of conflicts at intra and inter-regional levels. The thesis also examines how the emergence of a dominant political party – the EPRDF and its ideology of revolutionary democracy – led to a paradoxical variance between the theory and practice of federalism in Ethiopia.

1.5   Objectives

Ethnicity has been used as the central instrument of restructuring the Ethiopian state since 1991. Obviously, debates on the impact of ethnic

federalism on peace and conflict in Ethiopia remain for much of the last 17 years normative and polarised. In fact, Ethiopia is not unique in this regard. Theoretical debates on the role of federalism in ethnic conflict management as will be discussed in the next chapter are still polarised. Some scholars argue that the only way to maintain a multi-ethnic country democratically is through federalism. While others contend that ethnic federalism, instead of reducing conflicts exacerbates them by institutionalising ethnic differences and legitimising the politics of ethnic resentment.

The normative debates on Ethiopian federalism also contain these broad theoretical views. Advocates of Ethiopian federalism, for instance, argued that such a system would bring a new era of ethnic democracy by tackling the legacy of ethnic inequality (Alemseged 2004; Andreas 2003; Mengisteab 1997; Young 1998). Critics of the ethnic federalist project, on the other hand, held the view that the use of ethnicity as the main organising device of the federation would unnecessarily essentialise identity; encourage secessionism and fragment political space along ethnic lines (Alemante 2003; Brietzke 1995; Ehrlich 1999; Lyons 1996).

However, understanding the impacts of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia requires going beyond these polarised debates and examining changes in inter-group relations at regional and local levels using comparative and empirical approaches. This thesis considers several cases from the Somali and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions. In doing so, it seeks to identify and discuss those contextual factors such as democracy, rule of law and others that contribute to the success of federalism in managing multi-ethnic countries. Finally, the thesis highlights some of the ideological and institutional aspects of Ethiopian federalism that need reform.

1.6 Analytical Framework

> One of the most difficult problems for students of federalism arises from the vast scope of the subject matter. ... [T]he study of federalism leaves few aspects of political life untouched (Gibbins 1987: 15).

Federalism is a broad concept that deals with constitutional and institutional design of governments, territorial and inter-group/ethnic conflicts, sharing of revenue (fiscal federalism), party politics and others. The other concerns of this thesis, ethnicity and ethnic conflicts are equally intricate and crosscut historical, cultural, economic and political

fields. Because of these, an analytical framework that guides this study fails to be parsimonious.

The fact that the success of federalism in peacefully managing conflicts is contingent upon democracy, rule of law and others further strengthens this challenge. In view of this, Radmila Nakarda notes (2002: 260-1):

> Although, in principle, the federalist formula provides the most accommodating framework for multiethnic societies, it is not a pre-packaged panacea. Experiences of success and failure offer abundant edifying insights, but they do not generate coherent messages that can be systematised into a neat blueprint. A principle or policy that eases conflict in one situation may fuel it in another, the very federal arrangement that secures the state entity in one multiethnic setting, may lead to its violent break-up in another.

All these require building a broad analytical framework, which incorporates not only salient political, economic and social factors that explain the emergence and development of federal system but also those contextual factors that elucidate the reasons for the success or failure of federations. Hence, this study seeks to develop an analytical framework that considers three broad perspectives– history, the State and its instruments of control and multi-ethnic society.

1.6.1 Historical explanations

Any study on federalism 'can only be adequately dealt with if it is studied in conjunction with the entire historical development' (Boogman 1980: 7). Insights from history are particularly important to examine the circumstances that led to the establishment of a federation, the manner in which the federal bargain was offered and other key historical developments that would leave their indelible mark on the ideology and institution of federalism. Indeed, in any study that seeks to explain the restructuring of the Ethiopian state, the country's history has a crucial role. Czelaw Jeśman aptly expressed the significance of Ethiopian history in his frequently quoted statement: 'Ethiopia is a country burdened by its past.' (1963: 1). This dictum explains the important role that history plays in explaining the politics of the country.

In fact, the country has a unique history within Africa. It not only successfully resisted the European colonial onslaught but also undertook what Christopher Clapham called indigenous state formation akin to

European nations through the agency of warfare (2000). Like many other multi-ethnic ancient countries, Ethiopian history, nonetheless, impels contradictory impulses of glory and vanquish to its own citizens.[15] On the one hand, many Ethiopians take enormous pride in their country's effective resistance of colonialism, in its ancient history, unique system of writing and calendar. While others, on the other hand, take a critical look at the 'great tradition'[16] of Ethiopian history. Many particularly resent the wars of expansion and conquests that led to the emergence of Ethiopia in its current shape at the end of the 19th century. This controversial aspect of Ethiopia's history is crucially important to explain the emergence of radical opposition to the imperial regime under the slogan of 'land to the tillers' and the 'national question.'

1.6.2 State centred explanations

> The state and the institutions surrounding it…are themselves crucial factors in determining the outcome of political struggles, indeed often more influential than social forces or the efforts of popular interest groups (Brinkley cited in Griffin 2001: 289).

Federalism and ethnic conflicts are generally about politics of the State. Hence, it would be proper to examine the ideology, structures and legitimacy of the State. Accordingly, this study uses insights from such state centred concepts as political economy, hegemonic control and centre-periphery relations. These are more important in countries like Ethiopia where the 'state does not simply provide the arena in which various interests struggle for dominance' but also 'writes the rule book, polices the field, decides the winners, or even changes the game in the middle of the play' (Griffin 2001: 289).

The political-economy approach explains how politics and economics are inseparably linked influencing each other at different levels of society (Balaam and Veseth 1996: 5). For instance, Kenneth Post and Michael Vickers in their study of the structure of conflicts in Nigeria argued that 'economic, social and political forces are at play in a given situation, interacting in a complex pattern of cause and effect' (1973: 6). In the Ethiopian case, economic, social and political forces intertwine with ethnic conflicts and the federal restructuring of the country.

Many scholars increasingly use both political and economic factors to investigate the nature of ethnic conflicts. For instance, John Markakis argues that in the Horn of Africa, the State, as it controls the production

and distribution of material and social resources, has become the object and instrument of conflicts (1994a: 212). If one follows this proposition, it is possible to argue that the federal restructuring of Ethiopia decentralises conflicts by bringing the resources of the State to local and regional levels.

The concept of hegemonic control is about the political ascendancy of the few over the majority and the practice of maintaining power through a variety of authoritarian ways including coercive domination and elite cooption (McGarry and O'Leary 1993: 23). This approach could explain the politics of state-society relationships in Ethiopia. The imperial and the military regimes used instruments of coercive domination and cooptation to maintain their grip on power. In a similar fashion, the EPRDF practices hegemonic control, despite its promises of parliamentary democracy and federalism.

The hegemonic control of the country's politics through the centralised party machinery of the ERPDF has some repercussions for both federalism and ethnic conflict management. In such an atmosphere, one of the key promises of federalism, to mediate self-rule and shared-rule cannot be realized. More ominously, an ethnic federal arrangement without political pluralism and open and democratic contestation for power tends to induce ethnic conflicts than reduce them.

Next, the concept of centre-periphery relations signifies inequality existing in geographical space (Coakley 1992: 344; Hannerza 2001: 1611). In this study, it refers to the subordinate position of some of the regions particularly in the borderlands of Ethiopia to the political centre. Even if the federal reconstitution of the country aimed at changing the peripheral position of many ethnic groups, centre-periphery relations remains one important facet of Ethiopian federalism. Indeed, EPRDF's system of control over the regions illustrates the peripheral position of some of the units of the ethnic federation. In this respect, while the EPRDF controls the regional administrations of the most populous and sedentary regions of Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and SNNPR, its affiliates control the peripheral and low land regions of Afar, Somali, Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz. According to Christopher Clapham, this division reflects EPRDF's belief that the peripheral regions are not yet in a position to sustain its ideological orientation (2002a: 27).

1.6.3 Multi-ethnic society

There is no neat boundary separating the State from society (Migdal et al. 1994; Spicker 2000). Society-based explanations of political developments should not consider the State and society as distinct units. This means 'state and society are conceptualized as two intersecting and potentially independent variables…' (Chazan 1988: 122-3). In terms of political development, both the State and society influence each other.

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic country with enormous diversity. The country has about 85 ethno-linguistic groups. Generally, the languages spoken in the country are divided into four linguistic families, Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan.[17]

The interaction between the State and the multi-ethnic society influenced the country's political tradition and state structure. Donald Levine (1974), for example, claimed that 'Greater Ethiopia' emerged as multi-ethnic society because of what he called the 'Amhara thesis,' the 'Oromo anti-thesis' and the 'Ethiopian synthesis.' Levine's proposition, however, remains controversial.

More seriously, the Ethiopian political elite still grapple to find an appropriate concept to define the essence of Ethiopia as a multi-ethnic country (Asafa 1993; Merera 2006; Solomon 1993). This stalemate could partly be explained by the unequal ethnic relationships that prevailed in the country since the end of the 19th century (Keller 1988; Markakis 1987, 2003b).

Thus, the federal restructuring of the country could be considered as a response to the legacy of unequal ethnic relations in the country. In this respect, the EPRDF like its predecessors was engaged in a process of social engineering in order to develop what it considers an appropriate state structure for Ethiopia's multi-ethnic society (Alem 2004: 100). It is, however, important to note that any social engineering project could not be unidirectional. In the Ethiopian case as well the State itself was 'continually moulded by the society' (Migdal et al. 1994: 2). The ongoing federal restructuring of the country has been continuously negotiated between the state and the society at several levels. In some instances, this involves redefining the identity of ethnic groups.

Indeed, what Simeon and Conway observed in the Canadian context appears valid in the Ethiopian case. 'On the one hand, federalism … shaped by the underlying divisions; on the other, [it] can powerfully influence societal divisions and the ways in which they are mobilized and expressed' (2001: 340).

Table 1.2 *Ethiopian regional population distribution & ethnic composition*

Regions	Population	Estimate size in square kilometres	Ethnic composition (%)
Tigray	3 136 267	50 078.64	94.98 Tigre, 2.6 Amhara, 0.7 Erop, 0.05 Kunama
Amhara	13 834 297	159 173.66	91.2 Amhara, 3.0 Oromo, 2.7 Agew/Awi, 1.2 Kemant, 1.0 Agew/Khemera
Afar	1106 383	96 707.00	91.8 Afar, 4.5 Amhara, 0.92 Argoba, 0.82 Tigre, 0.78 Oromo, 0.45 Wolayita, 0.013 Hadiya
Oromia	18 732 525	353 006.81	85.0 Oromo, 9.1 Amhara, 1.3 Gurage, 4.6 others
Somali	3 439 860	279 252.00	95.6 Somali, 2.25 Oromo, 0.69 Amhara, 0.14 Gurage
Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's (SNNPR)	10 377 028	112 343.19	18 Sidama, 14.72 Gurage, 11.53 Wolayita, 8.53 Hadiya, 5.22 Keffa, 2.0 Mocha, 1.6 Tigre, 5.5 others
Gambella	181 862	25 802.01	40 Nuer, 27.0 Agnuack, 8.0 Amhara, 6.0 Oromo, 5.8 Mejangir, 4.1 Keffa, 2.0 Mocha, 1.6 Tigre, 5.5 others
Benishangul/Gumuz	460 459	49 289.46	26.7 Berta, 23.4 Gumuz, 22.2 Amhara, 12.8 Oromo, 6.9 Shinasha, 8.0 others
Harari	131 139	311.25	52.3 Oromo, 32.6 Amhara, 7.1 Harari, 3.2 Gurage

Source: The 1994 Ethiopian Population and Housing census

1.7 Research Design and Methods of Data Collection

The research design for this study depends mainly on comparative and empirical approaches. It, therefore, identifies some of the key trends of conflicts in federal Ethiopia and examines the situation in the two study regions. What follows presents the significance of a comparative research method and the manner of data collection.

1.7.1 Comparative research method

This study analyses the impact of federalism on ethnic conflict in Ethiopia by using a comparative approach. The comparative method, even if largely used by students of comparative politics interested in developing and testing theories that would be applicable beyond boundaries of a single society (Holt and Turner 1970: 6), has also been extensively used to analyse a wide array of political issues within a single country, particularly within federal polities (Bakvis and Chandler 1987: 4). Comparative research method, 'in its broadest sense is the process of discovering similarities and differences among phenomena' (Warwick and Osherson 1973: 7). The selection of comparative research method was motivated by the desire to examine how ethnic groups in two different regions, which have a considerable degree of comparability in terms of level of socio-economic development, marginality from the centre and political volatility, responded to the phenomenon of federal restructuring.

A comparative research method, according to Paul Pennings et al. needs to identify from the very beginning *what, when*, and *how* it is going to compare (1995: 5). It is also relevant to answer these questions in the context of this study. This study compared the impact of federal restructuring on ethnic conflicts by focusing on two regions that have a higher degree of comparability. The time-frame for this research is limited to political developments in the country since 1991. It nevertheless examined some historical factors in order to provide the study with the necessary background. Accordingly, it compares ethnic conflicts in two regions, which are associated with the federal restructuring of the country, along categories such as intra-regional and inter-regional conflicts.

The comparative research method in spite of its attractiveness as an important way of finding empirical relationships among several variables, it faces some critical challenges such as multiplicity of variables and small number of cases (Lijphart 1971: 685). Arend Lijphart recommended some practical ways to overcome some of these limitations. He suggested increasing the number of cases as much as possible, combining two or more essentially similar variables and focusing on comparable cases (Ibid 686-690). This study considered these suggestions in its research strategy and analysis. Hence, the thesis examined a number of empirical cases from both of the study regions to look at trends of autonomy conflicts. Moreover, the thesis considered federal restructuring and conflicts as its two key variables.

1.7.2 Case selection

One of the key factors in comparative research is the comparability of the cases. It is thus imperative to ask: Are the two regions (Somali and B-G) comparable? The Somali and the B-G regions share a number similarities. First, both regions are historically peripheral to the Ethiopian state. Like many other southern and eastern regions of the country, they became part of the Ethiopian empire during Menelik's expansion at the end of the 19th century. Since their incorporation, they remained peripheral to the country's political economy. Moreover, a low level of social and physical infrastructure characterises both regions as compared to the other regions of the country. The different designations that the political centre uses to refer to these regions collectively also reflect their marginality. These designations include 'emerging' and 'historically neglected' regions. While these designations are controversial, they indicate the degree of comparability of the four peripheral regions: Afar, Somali, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz.[18]

Second, both regions saw armed insurgent movements in the name of national self-determination during the pre-1991 period. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) started armed opposition to the political centre in Somali region during the 1970s with the aim of uniting the Somali inhabited part of Ethiopia with the Republic of Somalia. In the case of B-G, the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) emerged during the second half of the 1980s. While the armed opposition within the Somali areas was strong and supported by the neighbouring irredentist Republic of Somalia, the impact of the BPLM's armed struggle was limited.

Third, both regions as compared to the remaining regions of the federation are characterised by political volatility and incidences of conflicts. Since the change of the Derg regime in 1991 and the introduction of regional governments, these regions saw several purges with a high level of intervention from the political centre.

Fourth, conflicts in both regions have international dimensions. The Somali and B-G regions share boundaries with Ethiopia's neighbours, the Sudan and Somalia. Both regions are to some extent influenced by developments in these neighbouring countries. This is particularly important considering the artificiality of the boundaries that divide these countries and the continued political instability in the Sudan and Somalia, which respectively share a boundary with the Benishangul-Gumuz and the Somali regions. Similarly, geo-strategic interests of regional and international players in the Horn of Africa and the continued proxy

warfare among the countries of the Horn, Ethiopia and Eritrea in particular (Abbink 2003) could adversely influence peace and stability in Ethiopia in general and in the peripheral regions (e.g. Somali) in particular.

In spite of several similarities between the two regions as outlined above, there are also some major differences between them. The main difference lies in the ethnic makeup of the regions. The Somali who practice Islam dominate the region. In contrast, the B-G region contains several minority ethnic groups and a significant settler population. The latter were introduced to the region through the military regime's controversial programme of resettlement during the 1980s.

1.7.3 Data collection

Regarding data, this study depended on three different kinds of sources– interviews, documents and academic literature. First, interviews and focus-group discussions constituted major sources of primary information. For political research in developing countries like Ethiopia, where the written culture is limited and most political activities occur in informal ways, the significance of interviews cannot be underestimated. Regarding method of data collection for his study on the history of the TPLF in Ethiopia, John Young noted that 'The paucity of documents and records, the limitations of historical and political studies, together with the problem of media reports, means that the generation of data for a study such as this could only be provided by interviews' (1997: 7). This study also used focus-group discussions and semi-structured and open-ended interviews. My informants were elders, leaders of clans and villages, local and regional officials, retired civil servants and others.

On this basis, I conducted two rounds of fieldwork. The first round of fieldwork was in order to familiarise myself with the two study regions and to collect information on the case studies that examined intra-regional conflicts. Accordingly, in 2004-05, I stayed in the regional capital of the Somali region (Jijiga) for three months (November 2004 to January 2005) and conducted six focus-group discussions and 58 individual interviews about historical developments in the region and the state of intra-regional conflicts. Since Jijiga is the capital of the new Somali region and almost all of the elders of the Somali clans involved in violent conflicts (like the Sheikash and the Ogaden) come regularly to the regional capital, it made it possible to conduct the interviews. Similarly, I stayed in the regional capital of the B-G region, Assosa for

two months (March-April 2005) and managed to conduct three focus-group discussions and 22 interviews.

The second round of fieldwork, conducted in 2007 to write the cases regarding inter-regional conflicts involving both of the study regions. The fieldwork for these sections required extensive travel to some localities affected by intra-federal boundary conflicts. Hence, in a 15-day field visit in March 2007 in the remote southern town of Moyale, I observed the problems associated with the emergence of a dual ethnic administration of the Somali and Oromo regions in Moyale. Moreover, four focus-group discussions and 15 interviews were organised. The material collected during this fieldwork contributed to the case study on Moyale. The second, three-week field visit in May 2007 was to gather data on inter-regional boundary disputes between the B-G and its Amhara and Oromo neighbours. I visited several localities affected by boundary conflicts and organised five focus-group discussions and 17 interviews. The last field visit was made in July 2007 for 15 days in the Afar region to gather information on how the federalisation process affected the conflict between the Afar and the Issa. In addition, visits to some of the conflict hotspots and new towns established by the Issa on traditional Afar territories such as Gedamaitu and Undofo, I conducted three focus-group discussions and seven interviews.

In addition to the obvious challenges of logistics and arranging meetings with many of the informants, there were a number of other challenges regarding the method of using interviews and focus-group discussions as key instruments for generating data. First, in many areas subjected to prolonged conflicts (e.g. the Moyale and the Afar-Issa cases) both the elders and other informants were sceptical about the contribution of research to the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Second, informants from communities affected by conflicts tend to exaggerate their side of the story. In order to reduce the biases of those involved in the conflict and keep them from influencing the output of the research, this study uses what social researchers call a triangulation method. In addition to documentary sources and secondary literature, in undertaking the fieldwork itself, this study used multiple sources of information, interviewing and organising focus-group discussions with individuals not related to the protagonists of local conflicts. Because of the sensitivity of the subject that the study dealt, I am obliged to withhold the names of all informants. However, some information about the settings of interviews and focus-group discussions is provided in chapter endnotes.

This thesis also employs a wide array of documentary sources. These include governmental statistical reports, regional, federal and party

documents (particularly the EPRDF). The study also used newspapers, magazines and other secondary sources of information.

1.8 Structure of the Study

This study is organised in 11 chapters. The first chapter presents the problems that the thesis aims to examine. It in particular provides the problem statement, the research questions and objectives. It also outlines the analytical framework and the research design of the thesis. The main concern of the second chapter is the examination of theoretical debates on federalism, ethnicity and conflicts.

After providing the methodological and theoretical contexts of the study in the first two chapters, the thesis presents the historical and ideological basis for ethnic federalism in Ethiopia in the third chapter. Chapter 3, in particular discusses the historical factors that necessitated the federal restructuring of the country and the influence of the Marxist-Leninist (ML) theory of nationalities on the ideology and institutions of federalism in Ethiopia. It also examines some of the factors that explain the variance that prevails between the promises of federalism and its practices by focusing on the revolutionary democracy ideology of the ruling party and the emergence of a *de facto* one party system.

Chapter 4 aims at examining the impact of federalism on conflicts in Ethiopia at a national level. Hence, it discusses the contending debates on the impact of federalism on ethnic conflicts. It also surveys some of the asymmetrical features of Ethiopian federalism and consider their implication on conflicts. It furthermore discusses the influence of federalism on secessionist conflicts. Finally, it presents some of the trends of autonomy conflicts in the country.

The fifth chapter, being the first chapter on the study regions, gives general background information about the peripherality, history, governance and ethnic make up of the Somali and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions. As demonstrated in this chapter, the two regions share similarities and differences. The sixth and the seventh chapters respectively deal with intra-regional autonomy conflicts in the Somali and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions. In a similar fashion, chapters 8 and 9 examine the impact of federalism on inter-regional conflicts. The tenth chapter considers aspects of centre-regional relationships. It in particular discusses the three key institutions in the administration of centre-

regional relations – the federal executive, the HoF and the ruling party. The chapter also discusses the political economic exchange that prevails between the peripheral regions like the Somali and the B-G and the political centre.

The last chapter synthesises the several points discussed in the thesis and gives a general conclusion. In doing so, it provides a brief comparison of the findings of the thesis from the two study regions. Moreover, it reappraises federal theories in the context of Ethiopia. Finally, it considers some ideas about reforming the Ethiopian federation.

Notes

[1] Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is a coalition of four ethnic-based organisations—the dominant Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). For more discussion about its evolution and ideology, see chapter 3.

[2] In this thesis, the term 'Somali National Regional State (SNRS),' 'Somali region,' or Region 5 are interchangeably used. The same applies to Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State (BGNRS) and Benishangul-Gumuz or B-G.

[3] Federal restructuring refers to devolutionary processes that lead to the federalisation of a once unitary political system into a federation (see Weinstock 2001). There will be more discussion on the subject in chapter 2.

[4] Like the Soviet discourse of nationalities, debates about ethnic domination in Ethiopia were largely framed in terms of the problem of nationalities and terms like nations, nationalities and peoples were used to refer to ethnic groups. As the distinctions among the three terms are not clear, this study uses the concept of ethnic groups (see chapter 3).

[5] The 1974 Ethiopian revolution ended the monarchic rule over the country. Because of the revolution, Emperor Haile Selassie I who reined for more than 40 years was deposed. The military regime, which ruled the country from 1974-1991, pursued a Marxist ideology and the country was closely allied during the Cold War with the countries of the former Eastern bloc.

[6] Derg, Amaric-Geez word for a committee, refers to the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) that ruled Ethiopia from 1974-1991.

[7] These were Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somalia, Benishangul, Gurage/Hadya, Sidama, Wolaita, Omo, Kafa, Gambela, Harar and Addis Ababa. (see TGE 1992).

8 *Zone* is an administrative division found immediately below the regions. It is usually responsible for coordination of the activities of the *woreda* and the regional executive. Except the SNNPR, the regional executive appoints the officials of the *zones*.

9 *Woreda* in Amharic refers to district and is found below the *zone*.

10 Special *woreda* have been established largely in the Southern region for minority ethnic groups, which cannot constitute either a *zone* or a regular *woreda* because of their small population size.

11 *Kebele* was introduced as the lowest tier of local government by the military regime in 1975. It refers to neighbourhood associations. In the present local and regional government system, *kebele* serves as the lowest tier of local government just below the *woreda*.

12 The concept 'autonomy conflict' is adopted from S.E. Cornell, who in his study about the Caucasian conflicts suggested that ethnic federalism and autonomy, even if they are widely promoted as instruments of resolving and reducing conflicts they generate autonomy conflicts (2002).

13 Ethnic entrepreneurs refer to the 'ethnic elites' who have 'a vested interest in advancing particular agendas' on behalf of their ethnic groups (see Carment 2003: 31).

14 The term 'titular' refers to those ethnic groups entitled to exercise self-administration in their home regions in the context of Soviet federalism (Slezkine 1996). Similarly, in the context of this thesis, the concept refers to those ethnic groups entitled to exercise self-administration within their ethnic homelands (sons of the soil). For instance, the Somali are titular ethnic group within the Somali region. Non-titular refers to those individuals and groups who live out of their presumed ethnic homelands and thus there are restrictions on their political role. For instance, the Amhara settlers of the Benishagnul-Gumuz region are non-titular.

15 Christopher Clapham suggested the rewriting of Ethiopian history with a view to accommodate the histories of the marginalised and the vanquished as one way of addressing historic grievances and inequities (2002b).

16 According to Clapham, the great tradition in Ethiopian history emphasizes the ancient roots of the country and the glories of the state but privileges 'a particular power structure, and the people associated with it…. Orthodox Christians, and notably those who speak Amharic and Tigrinya' (Ibid 40).

17 These divisions do not have that much political relevance, as the divisions are amorphous and geographically widely dispersed (Hudson 1999).

18 In this study, these regions are referred to as 'peripheral,' and 'the four regions' interchangeably.